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AUTHOR Fairchild, David L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that an understanding of sport must be predicated upon an understanding of the culture in which it occurs. Because 20th century American society views competition and success in sport as preparation for competition and success outside of sport, a revision in emphasis within sport itself may lead to a revised emphasis in life outside of sport. Specifically, this paper recommends a revival of the Aristotelian concept of competition as an opportunity for self-fulfillment and not merely a device through which to vanquish opponents. Sport may then become a positive and creative force for the improvement of society. (Author)

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# CONTEMPORARY SPORT AND MORAL BEHAVIOR: FAREWELL TO THE WELL - PLAYED GAME?

"Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."
-- popular adage

"When the one Great Scorer comes to write against your name, He marks not that you won or lost, but how you played the game."
-- Grantland Rice

Much contemporary writing on sport tends toward the polar extremes of popular idealized reflections on the virtues of sport, such as Jerry Kramer's Instant Replay, or critical first-person accounts by former sports figures who have become disenchanted with sports, such as Dave Meggysey's Out of Their League or Gary Shaw's Meat on the Hoof. There is one point on which nearly all writers on sport agree, however: the institution of sport has become a significant feature of contemporary American society.

For the purposes of this essay, sport may be understood as a game of physical skill involving the knowing acceptance of certain rules just so the activity made possible by such an acceptance can occur. In addition, a sport must have generated a wide following included in which is a body of "experts" whose concern it is to improve the game and its players, as well as a high degree of stability. This stability will include longevity and a number of roles and institutions serving functions ancillary to the game itself (chief among these would be training, teaching, development, criticism and archivism).[1] On this definition, such obvious candidates as football, basketball, marathon running, and sky-diving would be accepted as sports, but such games as backgammon and chess would be excluded.

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Recent analyses of sport by philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists have demonstrated that any given sport reflects the society in which it occurs, and that sport can only be understood by understanding the society and culture from which it is derivative. William Sadler argues,[2] for example, that America is between what he calls a doing culture and a having culture. For such cultures, the world is seen as a great arena: wherever one finds himself, he should attempt to win. Competition is conceived as an interminable historical process, but not as an intrinsic aspect of self-actualization. One competes in order to accomplish results which are generally extrinsic to the actual competitive process. Competition is valued if it is conceived as an efficient way to increase having. American sports competition, accordingly, has two foci: the competitor sees his activity as oriented towards more having, because wealth is the primary means toward greater consumption; spectators see competitive activity and competitors as commodities to be consumed within a life style oriented toward having more and more.

If there is value to sports competition in such a context, it is necessarily derivative from the value attached to competition in general. A number of recent studies, among the best of which are Arnold Beiser's The Madness in Sports[3] and Jack Scott's The Athletic Revolution,[4] have argued convincingly that the psychological and sociological situation in organized sport, on any level from Little League to professional, is a reflection of societal values that are usually negative. According to Beiser and Scott, sport often perpetuates these values even when they are recognized as directly contrary to the real values

inherent in sports participation. Beiser goes so far as to claim that for some athletes the manner of participation in sports is a manifestation of (and a clue to) their psychological disorder.

George Leonard, author of The Ultimate Athlete, describes the general context of sport in American society in extremely negative and pessimistic terms:[5] "Cheating, attempting to cheat, and setting up precautions against cheating are essential to sports as we know them. Far from standing in opposition to our athletic tradition, these activities are what make a majority of our present-day sports events possible." Sport attains its primary value by providing preparation for the world outside of sport: youngsters learn the American virtues of self-discipline, respect for authority, courage, perseverance and so forth by playing football. More specifically, "By playing sneaky games with officials, we prepare for success in the world outside of sports."[6] As a society, we express outrage and dismay when we learn of college recruiting violations, drug abuse by high school coaches, or betting on games by professionals. Such "righteous indignation" is short-lived, however, provided the teams and players in question are winners. The crime, as it were, is constituted not in the cheating, but in getting caught at the cheating. The guiding philosophy for this American zeal to be successful through competition is summarized by the quip often (erroneously) attributed to the late Vince Lombardi: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

Robert Lipsyte characterizes this situation as Sportsworld, a world in which sport is sacred for all the wrong reasons: because it overemphasizes the expendability of youth, because it defines success

only in terms of record-setting performances, and because it dehumanizes the participants. Sportsworld, Lipsyte claims, is a gross distortion of sport because, "It has made the finish more important than the race, and extolled the game as that William Jamesian absurdity, a moral equivalent to war, and the hero of the game as that Henry Jamesian absurdity a 'muscular Christian'."[7]

Sportsworld, as symptomatic of the "winning is the only thing" philosophy, provides an initial perspective from which to understand the recent alarming increase in non-essential sports violence. Representative of the extraneous violence which marks much of contemporary sport is the brawling which has resulted in arrests for on-ice behavior in hockey, as well as the genesis of such sports as contact karate. Heroes are those who compete. Superheroes are those who compete successfully. Successful competition is that in which the opponent is vanquished from the arena. Why is there non-essential violence in sport? Because there is non-essential violence in the non-sport world. Our increasingly urbanized society offers steadily decreasing play-spaces, as parks are replaced by office buildings, vacant lots are paved over, and the streets are filled with moving traffic. In this environment, there is an increasing tendency toward brutality and violence in general, as outlets for personal and social frustration and alienation. Vicariously acceptable outlets are found in spectator sports such as football and hockey. A continuation of this trend toward violence may well result in the replacement of football and hockey by fictionalized sports as rollerball as the primary spectator sports in our society.

Is there a viable alternative to this overemphasis on winning and competition? Grantland Rice, with his Aristotelian emphasis on how the game was played, recognized the fundamental truth that provides the possibility of an alternative understanding of sport and competition. We Americans, in our single-minded pursuit of victory, dehumanize our opponents by making them nothing more than the instruments for our victory. By dehumanizing our opponents, we dehumanize ourselves. Eventually, we will lose touch with reality and with existence itself. What is wanted here is an emphasis on style, on the essence of both life and competition, and not solely on the outcome. We should not ask "Who won?" with its sterile emphasis on box scores and statistics. We should ask instead, "Did O.J. dance?" with an appropriate emphasis on the essence and style with which the game was played. Once we understand how to ask this question, we will be able to begin to understand the French philosopher Albert Camus' claim that he learned all he knew about ethics from sport.

Sport does reflect the values of the society in which it occurs. It is precisely because American society does view competition and success in sports as a preparation for competition and success outside of sport, that a revision in emphasis within sport may provide the stimulus for a revision in emphasis outside of sport. A brief look at the etymology of "contest" is instructive.[8] "Contest" is derivative from con and testare, meaning to testify with. When one testifies, he expresses or displays that which he has, be it conscious knowledge, physical prowess, faith or some other ability or trait. In contesting, one "lays out" his existential fullness, with the assistance of his

opponent. One is hindered *for*. Similarly, the Latin verb *competo* refers to acting together or seeking together, and implies the notion of coming together to reach an agreement. The Latin term *contendo* signifies to stretch, strain or exert oneself. As implied in the Greek term *agon*, a contest is an encounter in which the participant stretches himself toward the physical and conscious limits: a contestant is one who engages in an activity that calls forth the full exercise of his powers. Competition in sport can and should be understood as an interpersonal contest in which the competitors testify to their competence *as they interact*.

Were we Americans to revert to the Greek and Latin cultures for a model for understanding competition, we would be able to see our rivals not as other men, as it were, but as standards of excellence to which we are assisted by our so-called opponents. In a Kantian framework, we would be able to regard each person as a free moral agent, not as a mere object bound to and thereby exploited by the self-interested desires and inclinations of others. Competition would become an opportunity for self-fulfillment: the victory sought not so much a victory *over* as a victory *with* others.

That this position has much to recommend it can be seen *prima facie* from the quality of performances that even relatively unskilled athletes are capable of offering when performing with opponents who are considerably more skilled than they are. Such performances are possible because being/doing finds closure in consciousness for the skilled player, while consciousness finds closure in being/doing for the less skilled player. Standards of excellence can only be obtained by viewing the opponent as an agent who provides the opportunity for

testing and extension. The opponent becomes an enabler or facilitator for the activity of the opponent. Competition is a cooperative venture.

Significantly, this interpretation of competition is fully consistent with the phenomenological thesis of embodiment: that meaning arises at the intersection of the world, consciousness, and being. Competition allows for an individual to express his humanity through his performance in sport. Of course winning is important. But it is not the only thing, it is not everything. O.J. can dance precisely because he has recognized this fundamental fact of existence. With this understanding, sport may become more than just a mere reflection of society, it may become a positive and significant force for the improvement of society.

NOTES

1. This point is nicely developed by Bernard Suits, "The Elements of Sport," in Osterhoudt, pp. 48-63.
2. William Sadler, "A Contextual Approach to an Understanding of Competition: A Response to Keating's Philosophy of Athletics," in The Philosophy of Sport, ed. Robert Osterhoudt (Springfield: Charles Thomas, 1973), p. 176-191.
3. Arnold Beiser, The Madness in Sports (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967).
4. Jack Scott, The Athletic Revolution (New York: The Free Press, 1967).
5. George Leonard, The Ultimate Athlete (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 14.
6. Ibid.
7. Robert Lipsyte, Sportsworld (New York: Quadrangle Press, 1975), p. xiv.
8. The following discussion is based on Eleanor Metheny's discussion in her volume Connotations of Movement in Sport and Dance (Dubuque: William Brown, 1965).